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Spending Transportation Money Wisely

By Michael W. Thompson

9/9/2015 -- A good idea for better public policy can, at times, take years to become reality. But when it happens it proves that old saying, “Every journey starts with the first step.”

Transportation spending is a good case and point.

In 1999, the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy published a study focused on creating a transparent rating system for new road projects so that the Commonwealth Transportation Board, the decision making body for spending transportation dollars, could evaluate suggested projects based on a clear set of criteria, rate these projects based on this set of criteria, and then spend the taxpayers’ money based on the results.

This study was called, “*Taking Politics Out of Planning: A New Statewide Model for Prioritizing Transportation*” ([here](#)) and we did it at the request of the Virginia Chamber of Commerce. The idea was endorsed in the legislative agendas of the state chamber and several regional and local chambers of commerce and continued to be for some years.

One of those ideas became a key part of the transportation law approved in the last year of Governor McDonnell’s administration. The top priority in spending this new money from the taxpayers was congestion relief – just as the Jefferson Institute recommended and promoted for many years, starting with its 1999 study.

But now there is more to this story.

Governor McAuliffe has worked with the Republican controlled legislature to, in his words, “pick the right projects and take politics out of transportation.” Sound familiar?

The General Assembly passed legislation earlier this year requiring that new transportation projects – other than maintenance, bridge replacement and safety – be evaluated through a statewide process focused on these criteria: congestion relief, economic development, land use, safety, the environment and accessibility. And in June the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) agreed to this process so that future transportation projects will be determined based on their merits as decided upon by this set of criteria. This is a sensible business approach to spending our money.

These criteria for determining the most effective transportation projects sounded familiar so I went back to that 1999 study and reviewed it ([here](#)).

That study was a basis for discussions for several years by business and community leaders interested in building a better transportation system. It suggested a clear set of criteria to evaluate transportation projects and even outlined a rating system that could be used and showed some examples. That list for prioritizing spending was very similar to what is now official state policy: congestion relief, multi-modality, safety, efficiency, connectivity, economic enhancement, land use, safety, and environmental enhancement. These are very similar to the recently adopted policy mentioned earlier.

The lesson of this saga is that good public policy ideas can take time to ripen and to be adopted. Sometimes good ideas tend to sit there on the shelf and referred to year after year until a leader says, “You know, I’ve heard about this idea somewhere. Let me take a look.” And there it is, sitting right there, looking straight at the policy maker. The light goes on, the gears begin to move and good policy is the result.

The Jefferson Institute report went on to suggest an actual rating system and model that would make sure that all projects, whether of statewide or regional or local significance, be compatible with the overall statewide strategy for providing a comprehensive and efficient transportation system as cost-effectively as possible. This suggested model could compare the relative strengths and weaknesses of proposed transportation projects. A model such as this will hopefully be developed by the CTB in order to properly evaluate and compare projects.

With more than \$6 billion in new transportation monies coming on line over the next few years it is key that these funds be well spent. Prioritizing this spending is what our taxpayers expect from those we elect to be good stewards of our money.

Governor McAuliffe, the General Assembly and the Commonwealth Transportation Board did the right thing by codifying that transportation spending must be prioritized in a sensible and transparent fashion based on a clear set of criteria.

This is a major reform and will help improve Virginia’s economic competitiveness. It is a goal that the Thomas Jefferson Institute first suggested in 1999. So for the cynics out there: this shows that good ideas can and do work their way to the top. Just keep trying and don’t give up.